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**HISTORIC PRESERVATION REVIEW BOARD  
STAFF REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION**

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Landmark/District:	<b>Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater</b>	(x) Agenda
Address:	<b>1365 H Street NE</b>	
Meeting Date:	<b>June 30, 2022</b>	(x) New construction
Case Number:	<b>22-330</b>	( ) Revised concept

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The applicant, Salvation Arts, LLC, contract purchaser and agent for property owner Century Arts, LLC requests the Board’s review of a concept to construct a new five- and six-story building to the east of and behind a partially retained Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater, a Historic Landmark building at 1365 H Street NE (Square 1027 Lot 829). The project proposes the removal of two, one-story commercial buildings to the east of the landmark building and their replacement with a six-story wing to abut the historic landmark as well as the removal of a portion of the landmark building and its replacement with a five-story rear wing. The project assumes the consolidation of the three lots into a single lot and incorporation of a partially retained and restored Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater into the new building.

**Background on Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater**

Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater, a modest-scaled but architecturally notable one-story Romanesque Revival-style building, was constructed in 1928 as an automobile showroom and service garage. Built during the first wave of mass production of automobiles in the United States, the building reflects the predominant characteristics of the evolving building type, including a storefront showroom—where the company displayed its “Hupmobiles”—and rear workshops for the repair and adjustment of automobiles. Typically, showrooms from this era faced the public rights-of-way and were designed in a variety of architectural styles with quality materials and craftsmanship, while the rear repair shops were utilitarian in nature and generally only accessible from the alleyways. During the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, consolidation in the automobile industry, competition from larger dealers, and the rise of the suburbs where larger showrooms with ample parking could be constructed, led to the demise of the city’s smaller car dealerships like Motts. In 1942, Mott Motors closed, but conveniently, around the time of its closure, there was a high demand for neighborhood movie theaters. Mott Motors, with its storefront showroom and rear repair shop, provided a perfect theater venue, and the owner thus converted Motts into the 400-seat Plymouth Theater. Although several theaters, including the Atlas, stood along H Street NE before construction of the Plymouth, these were restricted to whites-only audiences in an area where many Blacks also lived. From the outset, the Plymouth was not racially segregated. Upon its dedication in 1943, the *Washington Afro American* hailed its opening, noting, “Not only does this house help meet the long felt need for motion picture entertainment, but will also help residents obtain recreation without violating the ban on pleasure driving, being within walking distance for many and on a streetcar line for others.”

Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater was designated a DC Historic Landmark in 2004 for both architectural and historic reasons. The building faces H Street NE, an important commercial/transportation corridor, with its distinctive Romanesque Revival-style stone façade and show window along the public right-of-way, and its repair shop at the rear. The building extends 100 feet deep on its 145-foot-deep lot. It is covered with a flat roof which was historically lit with skylights providing natural light to the floor of the workshop, a common characteristic of the building type. The interior of the building is an open span structure with concrete wall columns (pilasters) supporting concrete or steel roof beams. The pilasters feature Corinthian capitals, but otherwise ornamentation is minimal.

### **Project**

The project proposes to demolish the adjacent non-historic buildings at 1371-1375; consolidate the lot(s) upon which those two buildings sit with that of Mott Motors; remove portions of the historic landmark building; construct a new multi-story building with retail on the ground floor and housing above (technically it will be an addition to Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater); and restore the façade and a 32-foot depth of the historic landmark. As proposed, the new building will be comprised of three parts: a six-story wing facing H Street NE abutting the east wall of Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater and extending back to the rear of the lot; a partially retained and restored façade of the historic landmark; and a five- and six-story wing set back 32 feet from the façade of the historic building and extending back to the alley.

Both wings of the new building share a similar arrangement of curtain wall construction with large openings or bays arranged more or less in a checkerboard pattern across the two street-facing facades. The large bays feature projecting balconies on the east wing and inset balconies on the rear wing.

### **Evaluation**

As the Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater is a historic landmark, a greater degree of scrutiny is being applied to the project than if it were a contributing building in a historic district since the purposes of the DC Historic Preservation Act encourage the restoration of historic landmarks (DCMR 10A 2002). As presented, the project calls for the substantial removal of the historic building, leaving only the façade and 32 feet of the roof and west side wall intact. Although the façade—the building’s principal character-defining feature—will be restored, a substantial portion of the structural components of the building including the east side wall, two-thirds of the west side wall, the rear wall, and two-thirds of the roof and its sky lights, will be removed.

The first step in this review process is to determine whether the proposed work constitutes demolition. As defined in the Historic Preservation Regulations (DCMR 10C 305.1), work considered demolition includes, but is not limited to: the removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of the structural components of the building, such as structural walls, floor assemblies and roofs; the removal or destruction of all or a substantial portion of the roof along with all or substantially all of one or more exterior walls; the removal or destruction of all or substantially all of an entire wing or appendage of the building, such as a rear ell, unless the wing lacks physical integrity, or is not a character-defining feature (DCMR 10-C 305.1). Based upon these criteria, the project, as presented, constitutes demolition and is thus not consistent with the purposes of the Historic Preservation Act. Should the Board determine that the level of removal constitutes demolition, the project will need to be referred to the Mayor’s Agent for Historic Preservation.

Should the Board determine that the level of removal does not constitute demolition, then the second step is to determine whether the project is compatible with the historic building and consistent with the Historic Preservation Act.

Overall, the issue of compatibility rests largely with the rear wing that will replace a portion of the historic landmark building. The proposed east wing of the new building is not within the landmark boundaries as the lots are currently configured and poses little preservation concern. This wing faces H Street, is aligned with the buildings along the street, including Mott Motors/Plymouth Theater, and offers retail at the ground floor in keeping with the historic building rhythm of the streetscape. The new building will abut the landmark building as the existing building on the site does, so will not alter the attached relationship of the buildings. And, although the new six-story wing will rise above the buildings around it, it is consistent with the height of new buildings along the corridor and will likely set the stage for others to be built in the 1300 block in the future.

The rear wing, however, compromises the character of the historic building by diminishing the already modest-sized building to a remnant of the building. The proposed setback at 32 feet is drawn at the back of the showroom portion of the building, eliminating the repair shop wing in its entirety. This setback represents less than one-third the depth of the historic building and is not sufficient to allow the historic building to read as an authentic building and independent structure from the proposed new building. The five- and six-story rear wing rises well above the partially retained building further diminishing its presence.

As proposed, the project is not consistent with DCMR 10-C 2201.2 which states: *An addition should be designed and constructed so that the historic building to which it is attached is substantially retained in the process of adaptation.*

Despite the challenges posed by the proposal, the project is not without resolution. HPO believes that by increasing the setback of the new rear wing to closer to half the depth of the 100-foot building and reducing the height of the rear wing meaningfully, the historic landmark could retain the appearance of being a separate and distinct building. Another alternative could be to introduce an open court between a partially retained historic building and a new rear wing giving the historic building the space to be its own.

### **Recommendation**

*HPO recommends that the Board deny the concept as presented. Staff further recommends that the Board encourage the applicants to revise its plans to more substantially retain and enhance the historic landmark building in a manner consistent with the purposes of the Historic Preservation Act.*